LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Fowler's volte face on Griffiths?

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Wonders will never cease. Was not the Griffiths report allegedly the finest document of its kind ever to have landed on a ministerial desk in Alexander Fleming House, and was not the intention to push ahead boldly with it by the beginning of April signalled loud and clear? Indeed, they were. But suddenly things have changed. Flexibility is the order of the day. Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, revealed this change of heart when he gave evidence to the final public hearing by the Commons social services committee on the report. His attitude took the committee by surprise, while his enthusiastic readiness to await its report so that he could take its findings into account went down extremely well.

Select committees are not all that accustomed to such ministerial indulgence. Mr Fowler, while making the necessary waiver that it was not a matter for him, even made clear that he would welcome a Commons debate on what he intends to do, and Mrs Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East, chairman of the all party committee, seized the chance to suggest that the committee's report on Griffiths would do nicely as the peg for such a debate. Indeed, she quite started to beam, having spent the previous hour glowering at Mr Roy Griffiths, of the Sainsbury supermarket firm, the leader of the team who prepared the report. His evidence did not go down at all well with the committee, and, since it seemed to me that the committee treated the BMA when it gave evidence at the first hearing with some scepticism, it is well to note now that there does seem to have been a change of heart on the part of a lot of the committee's members. Mrs Short reckons that the weight of the evidence has had a lot to do with it, as it is quite clear from the oral and written submissions that the reservations about the management structure proposed by Mr Griffiths are widespread throughout the National Health Service.

Not a marvellous witness

Mr Griffiths, it has also to be said, was not a particularly marvellous witness, and failed to back up some of his case with much evidence. Indeed, his claim that managers would improve efficiency in the NHS seemed more to rest on an assertion that they would because he believed they would than much else. He also fell foul of the committee when at one point he talked about "things" and everybody suddenly realised that what he meant was "patients." If he was there to "sell" his report he failed signally to do so. Mr Fowler, who turned up next with Sir Kenneth Stowe, permanent secretary at the Department of Health and Social Security, for moral support, was asked straight away by Mrs Short, who never beats about the bush, why things were being conducted at such a smart pace and what was the special significance of having general managers in post by the start of the 1984-5 financial year?

"Normally governments are criticised for taking far too long to come to conclusions," Mr Fowler replied. "Griffiths sets out quite specifically that they do not expect either the government or the health service to take an inordinately long time to consider their conclusions. But there is no particular magic in a starting date of

1 April or the beginning of the financial year. I am far more interested in getting changes, the right, permanent ones, rather than struggling to hit a particular timetable. I don't want it to slip to the extent that it slips to next year, but if you are talking of a month or two there is no conceivable problem about that."

Mrs Short then wondered whether parliamentary approval might be sought, or whether it would just be a case of saying, "carry on chaps." There was nothing that required parliamentary approval in the sense of legislation, Mr Fowler replied. But having said that he would personally welcome very much a full day's debate.

Role of managers

He insisted that it was not really a party political matter. Everyone agreed that the NHS needed better management. As for the select committee's report, ministers would want to take that into account before coming forward with final proposals on Griffiths. That report has now been agreed in its rough form, and the task of putting it into more or less elegant English will now begin. Mr Fowler's flexibility went so far as to indicate that minds had still to be made up about whether the managers would be full time or part time, and whether in areas where things were working efficiently there would be a need to impose a manager just to keep everything tidy. Mr Fowler emphasised that he was not proposing that the role of health authorities would change as a result of the appointment of managers.

The intention was to sharpen the management focus, and he cited the regional health authority chairmen in support of what he wants to do after Mr David Crouch, Conservative MP for Canterbury, had ventured to suggest that introducing managers would be like a nuclear explosion with considerable fall out affecting the members of the health authorities. That was to rather overstate the reaction inside the NHS, Mr Fowler chided. He also said that it was a misunderstanding to regard the general manager as a chief executive. That was why it was sensible to let discussion and debate flow on for a little longer because it was quite a complex concept clearly open to misinterpretation. He would give no hint of who the new chairman of the NHS management board proposed by Griffiths would be when Mrs Short asked if it would be someone from outside, adding, rather wickedly, "like Mr MacGregor?" Mr Fowler said that it would be someone from outside, that he would act as the accounting officer, and that the intention was to draw up the job specification, then go to a selection company to come up with some names, after which a shortlist would be drawn up, and that would go to the Civil Service Commission.

"It will be openly advertised and anyone is free to apply," he added. "We are not interested in his politics. All we are interested in is getting a good manager." As for his aims, Mr Fowler said that it was important for the government to take the health service down the road with it. "I do not think there is any point in trying to impose artificial time limits," he said. "I would like to achieve a permanent change agreed with and not forced on the health service." It must be said that he did a rather good job sabotaging Mr Griffiths, who had left the committee in no doubt that he believed that the NHS needed a clear message from the centre, and that his general management proposal was based on a conviction that consensus management had failed.